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FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3905
INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO IMMEDIATE 7893
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD IMMEDIATE 1616
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU IMMEDIATE 9054
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI IMMEDIATE 9857
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA IMMEDIATE 0686
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON IMMEDIATE 1684
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA IMMEDIATE 0319
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN IMMEDIATE 0104
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA IMMEDIATE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000683

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT UNVEILS ELECTORAL REFORM PLAN

REF: DHAKA 00547

Classified By: Amb. Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1.4(d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Election Commission briefed donors on its plan for electoral reform. The head of the Commission's Secretariat laid out a roadmap for preparing a new voter list

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with photographs. The new, computerized database resulting from this project will serve in the longer term as the basis for several documents which currently do not exist in Bangladesh, including national identification cards. END SUMMARY.

VOTER LIST WITH PHOTOGRAPHS
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[1](#)2. (SBU) On April 25, the government of Bangladesh invited international donors to a briefing on their plans for electoral reform and preparation of a new voter list. Representatives from most donor embassies, including Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, the European Commission, the United States and the United Nations (UN), attended.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Election Commission Secretariat head Humayun Kabir led the presentation. He said the new Election Commissioners who took office in February reviewed studies on electoral problems in Bangladesh. The Commissioners agreed a future list needed to be computerized, and a voter list with voter identification cards would be a longer-term project.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Instead, they adopted a proposal endorsed by the Awami League to create a list with photographs. The database created by the new registration exercise would also serve as the basis for a national identification card, addressing another major need. Secretary Kabir emphasized that this solution would restore credibility to the election process in the country, and save money in the long run.

AN 18-MONTH TIMELINE, A \$60-80 MILLION PRICE TAG
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[1](#)5. (SBU) The timeline for the project is 18 months. The cost of the project is estimated at between \$60 and \$80 million, and the Bangladeshi government will ask for donor assistance to help cover the costs. Working with the United Nations Development Program, the Election Commission began developing a roadmap for this new voter list and other electoral

reforms.

¶6. (SBU) The first phase of the project will require procurement of 8,000 computers and digital cameras, and identification and training of 80,000 enumerators. It will then take about eight months to collect the data, and another six months to prepare and publish the list.

A TIGHT, BUT FEASIBLE, TIMELINE

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¶7. (C) The Election Commission is soliciting international support for this initiative. It approached the UN, which agreed to providing consultants to formulate a project implementation plan. The UN will also coordinate multi-donor funding. Many donors have endorsed the Election Commission's plan in principle, saying the timeline is feasible, though perhaps ambitious given the number of serious problems with the electoral system the Election Commission needs to address.

COMMENT: FINALLY, (MAYBE) AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REAL REFORM

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¶8. (C) The consensus in the donor community is that under this new Election Commission, the government has finally started to address the gross politicization and other defects in the electoral system. There is also broad agreement that to do this properly will take time, and 18 months is not an unrealistic timeframe. Furthermore, the plan is receiving support from the UN and includes many ideas civil society organizations have been advocating for years. The Commission has also been consistent -- this roadmap conforms to the plan described to the Ambassador by the Chief Election Commissioner earlier in April (REFTEL).

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¶9. (C) A mechanism already exists for international donor coordination in the form of the Local Consultative Group, which consists of most donor embassies and organizations in Bangladesh. If donors agree to help fund this plan, they will have significant leverage to establish benchmarks to ensure the Election Commission complies with deadlines and adheres to the plans. Overall, the plan could represent a significant breakthrough for Bangladesh, since it would be the first time a sustainable, organic plan for electoral reform is implemented.

BUTENIS